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THE RECORDER



Nicely written.

Rowing On San Francisco Bay

by Frances Sutherland

Five a.m. The morning is soft, quiet. In another 20 minutes, we will be well into the bay and the pink and gold of the dawn will have begun to creep over the Oakland hills. It is very still, with only the sounds of calling birds and of oars moving rhythmically through the water. We are silent; no one wants to talk. We watch as a tanker glides out of the morning fog, under the Golden Gate Bridge, and into the shipping lane. She will pass Alcatraz and make a sharp starboard turn that will take her up-bay to the Richmond oil refinery. We quicken our pace to meet her, and as she passes, we feel the vibration of her engines, then catch and ride her bow wave. A bit much for the faint of heart; nonetheless, we stay afloat.

We turn our attention to our morning's plan. We might let the oars slip into their oarlocks somewhere between Alcatraz and Angel Island and dig into whatever feast we might have brought along. We know that these few quiet hours are very precious because by 11 o'clock the wind, and very often the fog, will be streaming through the gate, and the luxury of floating on beautifully flat and reflective water will have passed. By then we will have reached our destination, whether it is Angel Island, Tiburon, Mill Valley, perhaps the Brothers, maybe down bay towards San Mateo, or even East Bay.

Although at first glance, it may seem we are out for just a little morning row and exercise, these rows are never casual. They are studied and precise excursions into a natural world that has no interest in our presence. Our challenge is to understand the dynamics of winds, tides and currents, and what must be done in the face of nature's capricious whimsies and little treacheries. Coming home is always hard. We pick our tides and currents, but are pretty much at the mercy of the wind, fog or rough water. Sometimes we think we trick Mother Nature by knowing where there are offsets and reverse currents; other times we outsmart ourselves, beating our way home through wind and white water. Although we rarely mention it, on occasion we have been known to pull into safe water somewhere and wait out the tide and wind.

Mostly though, we pull into our dock at the Dolphin Club around noon, and while all the late risers are heading out in their sailboats and motorboats, we are happily ensconced at the Buena Vista Café, enjoying our Irish coffee and planning our next row.

When I first became acquainted with the Dolphin Swimming and Rowing Club in the mid-1970s, first as a visitor and soon thereafter

as a member, it was just beginning its transition away from a "home away from home" for curmudgeonly old guys who would rather be at the boathouse than anywhere else in the world, including their own homes. They were a garrulous and eccentric crew of retired firefighters, policemen, longshoremen, various political figures and heirs of a long line of San Francisco's finest workingmen.

Ladies were welcome—for one evening a year—when the club put on a big crab feast for the wives and girlfriends of the members. Other than that, a lady could accompany a member if she and her escort intended to go for a swim or a row, but there were no shenanigans and ladies did not loiter, and never entered the kitchen, zealously guarded by Herman Zahler. It was the era of Joe Bruno, who swam his 50th crossing of the Golden Gate bridge in 1985, and Walt Stack, the 85-year-old longshoreman, who still swam in the bay every morning, then proceeded to run from the clubhouse across the Golden Gate Bridge and back.

Once a year, Aldo Cueno, with his paddleboard, would hitch a ride to the light navigational buoy 15 miles offshore and paddle his way home. Dave Hinton, who learned to play boogie from GIs stationed in England during World War II, fell in love with the fiberglass double, which some of us disparagingly referred to as the "shower stall." I did row with him once and thought it was quite fun.

But the old guard was losing ground. Jane Doe could have come as a visitor only if her boyfriend had invited her. But he never did, so they got into a fight and she brought a sex discrimination suit against the Dolphin Club for not allowing women members. The howls of outrage could be heard up and down the west coast, but guess what? She won!!! She won because the land that the Dolphin Club sits on is owned by and leased from the City of San Francisco.

Thus 1976 ushered in a whole new era for the club. The first women who joined turned out to be not so frightening to the old boys after all. They weren't girlie girls, but unique in their own right—young, strong, competitive and primarily interested in swimming long distances in San Francisco Bay in temperatures ranging from about 50 to 61 degrees.

After a while the guys got used to having the women around and actually started liking them. The men never did tidy up, and the women weren't offended by an occasional congratulatory pat, nor did they try to invade the men's most

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sacred domain, the kitchen. Swimmers, such as Suzanne Heim, Morgan Kulla, and Joni Beemsterboer, started breaking records, and some went on to compete in the Hawaii Triathlons and the English Channel swims. Eventually, the women's locker room needed to be enlarged, and soon it seemed that a whole lot of people wanted to be Dolphin Club members, and then the entire club needed renovation.

All these years later, the old guard has mostly died off or moved on. I understand that today the Dolphins have morphed into a trendy and popular club with a great diversity of individuals and talent. But I have wonderful memories of those recalcitrant old gentlemen—piloting bay swims, rowing to Bolinas and Point Reyes, the Delta, San Jose, and even to the very end of the Napa River—and of experiences that instructed me and greatly enriched my life.

Footnote: Lapstrake wooden Whitehall rowboats were first made in New York City at the foot of Whitehall Street in the 19th century. Ranging from 14 to 25 feet in length, they were used in San Francisco to ferry goods, services and sailors on and off the boats coming into harbor. A few of these treasured antique boats have survived and live on today in continual use with dedicated maintenance in two historic San Francisco swimming and rowing clubs.